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The Life and Struggles of Red Cockaded Woodpeckers

by

Michaela Gay

A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

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Abstract

This series of paintings focuses on red cockaded woodpeckers, an endangered species of bird and the longleaf pines forests which they live in and are reliant upon. I drew my inspiration mostly from personal experience with my family's own efforts to restore one of these forests as well as my longstanding belief in the importance of protecting the environment. However, the point of these paintings is not to preach to people, but rather to show them the beauty of these trees and birds, so they can perhaps begin to care about them themselves instead of just being told that they should. I want to allow people to see them with more emotion and depth than they might otherwise. I combined subjects painted in a naturalistic way, to keep the focus on these specific species and their attributes, with more atmospheric elements in the backgrounds as well as more expressive poses and situations. The loose brushwork and flowing lines create a sense of movement and life beyond what might be seen in a simple image or photograph. Symbolism also plays a part in telling the story for these birds, often by having single birds or scenes to stand in for boarder themes. These elements push the perception past a casual glance at the real world, to indicate that there is something more to these plants and animals than people are usually aware of or paying attention to. I hope through this tribute to these species to show that these creatures have an intrinsic value and their own lives which are special and worth protecting, and to allow others a window into their story.

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Background	3
Inspirations	6
Process	8
Conclusion	13
Images	14
Bibliography	18

Introduction

I have always found inspiration in birds, from their vibrant colors and patterns to the way they move. If I was going to make a series, I felt it needed to be on birds, because I had enough practice with birds to feel confident making a series and it is a subject that I could reliably paint repeatedly without becoming too tired of it. The bird I chose was the red cockaded woodpecker. This bird is a highly endangered and vital part of the longleaf pine ecosystems that once covered large parts of the southeastern United States, but are now mostly gone. I have a personal connection with this bird because my family is attending to restore some of its habitat on our own land, which we hope they will one day return to. I am interested in it mostly for this connection to these forests. I believe this one is also a good candidate for this series because most people have not heard of it and it could use that attention brought to its struggle. The intention of my work is not to preach to others about saving the environment, but to let them see the life and struggles of this bird for themselves, so that they can get to know it. I find that being too pushy about a message usually has the opposite affect and just annoys anyone who does not already agree, and even some that do. Instead, I want people to appreciate these birds for the intrinsic value they have by simply existing as they are.

This paper will cover the scientific context that these birds exist in, as well as my approach to the subject. I have chosen to combine mostly realistic depictions of the birds and trees in more symbolic or abstract settings or backgrounds. Many of these paintings work best together, as they play off each other's ideas and continue them, but each gets a small part of the story and some tell large sections of the story alone. They are not meant to be real situations or locations, but rather each represents an important aspect of the birds' lives. This deviation from

reality helps make each part of the narrative more apparent and lets the focus be more on emotion. I want to show the emotions associated with these elements and to instill them with a life that people often do not ascribe to birds and trees the same way they would for other people.

Background

Red cockaded woodpeckers are an endangered species of bird which is native to the longleaf pine forests of the Southeastern United States. They are small for woodpeckers, with black and white plumage. The males have a small red patch on their heads. Longleaf pines are tall and straight with their branches concentrated at the top. They have layers of flakey bark and pine needles that come in groups of three and which can be about a foot long, hence the name. These woodpeckers require huge amounts of territory, usually about 50 ha. (Bruggeman) This territory is controlled by a male bird, who will ideally have one female breeding partner and up to 5 male helpers. The helpers provide assistance to the breeding pair in raising the chicks, but do not breed themselves, unlike most bird species where it is only the breeding pair caring for the chicks. They are often sons of the breeding pair from previous seasons.

Unfortunately, the large amounts of territory they need, as mentioned above, is often unavailable to them because of human activities in their forests. Old growth longleaf pine forests were a dominating ecosystem from North Carolina to Texas, but now are almost entirely gone. Very little has been replaced since it was cut down to make timber or clear farmland once European colonization of the region started. These ecosystems are often described as savannas, (large grasslands with few trees), because the trees should have a large amount of clear space between them. An ideal forest will have spaces between the trees with tall grasses and a few other short plants with large longleaf pine. Red cockaded woodpeckers need the environment to be this way to thrive. It has been found that they will not even forage in areas where the trees are too small and densely packed, much less nest.

Not only has much of their habitat been cleared, but the areas that have grown back up into forest have not grown into the correct type of forest. The biggest issue here is lack of fire. The forests are believed to have experienced ground level burns every 1 to 3 years, with 10 year gaps at the most. (Hammond) The fear of all forest fires, caused in part by efforts to prevent large crown fires that damage tree tops and are often started by human negligence, has in many places caused suppression of the needed smaller fires that maintain these ecosystems. Longleaf pine is very fire resistant, much more than most other tree species, including other pines like shortleaf and loblolly. Burning will rid the area of those competitors and allow the longleaf to grow in correctly. Without the fire, these other trees, which are more opportunistic than the sensitive longleaf, growing faster and closer together, will quickly choke out most of the longleaf. These other trees will grow in very dense configurations and more underbrush, vines, and briers will grow in until it can be too thick to walk through. Red cockaded woodpeckers, as well as many other species that live in the same ecosystem, cannot live in these conditions. Those short fires to clear the undergrowth and stop the growth of other pines and hardwoods are vital.

As well as sharing the same struggles in their loss of habitat as many other species living in these forests, such as indigo snakes or gopher tortoises, the loss of the red cockaded woodpecker itself would damage the delicate balance in the ecosystem even more. Red cockaded woodpeckers are considered a keystone species. Keystone species are species that in some way act as a vital point in an ecosystem, a linchpin that would cause drastic consequences if removed because so many species rely on them. These woodpeckers are considered a keystone species because of their role as primary cavity nesters. This means that they are the ones that originally carve out the holes in the trees for sleeping or nesting which other species will also use. They

will only create these holes in large, still living trees. They usually have many holes throughout their territory which can take years to complete. Ones they have left, are not currently using, or that have been damaged in some way, such as being widened by other woodpeckers, are used by other species, such as redbellied and redheaded woodpeckers, eastern bluebirds, great crested flycatchers, tufted titmice, brown-headed nuthatches, and southern flying squirrels, as well as various snakes, lizards, insects, and frogs. (fws.gov) These other species would suffer from the loss of the red cockaded woodpeckers because they could be left struggling to find appropriate places to nest or roost.

Inspirations

I wanted to do this project on red cockaded woodpeckers because of my family's personal connection with the longleaf pine forests. We own a piece of land that has been in the family for many generations and used to be longleaf forest before it was cut down to be used for farming instead. We no longer live on this land or use it for farming, so it had grown up into scrubby, crowded forest of thin, scraggly pine mostly. We decided several years ago that we wanted to restore the forest to what it once was, as best we could, so we cleared all the scruffy little trees and planted longleaf in its place. The trees are too small to be a proper forest at this point, 5 feet tall maybe, but we hope that one day when they are bigger the woodpeckers, as well as other species such as indigo snakes and gopher tortoises, will come back.

I also took a trip to a place in May 2019 in Southern Alabama where the forest was the way it should be, almost nothing but longleaf with the proper distance between them. I had already determined what I would do my series on, and this trip was to collect reference photos and so that I had been to one of these places myself at least once, since your sense of space is often quite different in a photo than in real life.

There are some artists who I like and who have done similar things to what I am attempting. Audubon and his famous prints of North American birds is one of these artists. I have always loved and admired his work, as I spent much of my childhood pouring over guidebooks, and it bears both some similarities and differences to my own. His work is focused on the scientific and identification, trying to make each bird look as real as possible. In my paintings, I did want the birds to be identifiable. I wanted it to be possible to look at my paintings and, if you knew what to look for, be able to tell what species of bird it was. I made sure to keep the details

of particular markings for this purpose. However, I did not aim to make them perfectly realistic. Instead, I tried to emphasize emotion and more symbolic scenarios to get my point across, stretching the realism somewhat.

This is where similarities to Charles Burchfield's work comes in. He was a landscape painter, and often heavily featured trees in his work. These paintings had a large amount of emphasis on light and movement. His work tends to be more dramatic in its movement and often more abstract than mine is, but there is a similar theme of showing a different side to this landscape through movement, through elements that do not typically oppose reality, contradicting natural shapes and patterns, but instead will push it further than it can really go to increase its impact.

Process

For these paintings, I wanted to combine representational painting with a style that was more abstract or symbolic. Because this project is focused on one particular bird and species of tree, it was important to include enough detail that these elements could be identified and distinguished from other species. However, this was no attempt at photorealism. I never needed the birds or trees to perfectly mimic reality; in fact, I did not want them to. This layer of slight abstraction and emotion was important. Often, when people look at birds or especially trees in real life, they do not ascribe the same feelings to them as they would other people. Trees are sometimes even seen as inanimate. This does not need to be the case here. These paintings are about the lives of these birds, so viewers need to have a more emotional connection to them. This slight bending of the lens to be a little simpler or more graphic than reality allows them to be more expressive. I can portray their emotions, prioritized over what expressions they might realistically have, or not have, or what positions they would be in.

I also had a focus on symbolism. I tried to use symbols that were mostly well known or easy to understand. The point of them was to make the message clearer, so no need to make it more difficult to understand by pulling in something too obscure. I carefully selected elements that would realistically be there and included them in ways that might not be as realistic, but told the right story visually. For example, one of my paintings includes thorns that you would expect to be there, but they have ensnared a bird in a way they almost certainly would not do. There are also symbols such as a cut tree standing in for deforestation as a whole.

Then there are my more abstract or atmospheric elements. These usually come in the form of backgrounds or in the way I use my brushstrokes. In some paintings, I have left the

background as a sort of unreal space that is not exactly any spot in particular. The setting is largely undefined, in order to show that this is symbolic. It is not happening in reality, it is happening in some kind of mind-space that is telling you something about reality, but not imitating it perfectly. The clear brushwork shows up even more often. I do not try to hide the artist's hand, but rather let those strokes shine through to direct the eye and to keep this layer of emotion over the painting. These looser strokes often act as a way to see visually the energy or emotion of a situation. These things become a noticeable force that manifests as these moving lines across the canvas. I especially used the direction of my brushwork to create abstract patterns in the backgrounds like the hint of flapping wings to indicate movement and lighting, often including a glow around the birds, to indicate this spirit that they have.

The first paintings are the simplest. This set of two small paintings (fig. 1) features a closeup of a pinecone from a longleaf pine and the wing of a red cockaded woodpecker. They each have the same simple color pallet and a focused more on drawing parallels between the details in ones species to the other, a look at their patterns and how they are similar. It is not steeped in the same symbolism and narrative as the others, largely just because it was the first and the idea was still coming together. It mostly serves to draw a connection between the birds and the pines trees through their similar color schemes and use of pattern.

Next is the image of a broader forest with only a tiny image of a bird among the trees, (fig. 2). This is where the paintings begin to intersect in their meanings more. This one is basically the ideal scenario. This forest and the pine cone close up are the only paintings based directly on a single reference image, the rest came mostly from imagination. This image was inspired by a photo that I took in a longleaf pine forest that has been well maintained and is at its

best, an ideal for what these forests should be, but so rarely are. The bird is depicted as a tiny figure among the trees not only to show that this is where it lives, but also it is so small as a way to represent the large amounts of territory these birds need. This is our ideal bird, in a perfect forest and with plenty of space to itself.

The way this forest is maintained in this state is fire. Fire supports the growth of the longleaf and keeps out competing species, allowing these forests to exist in this state and preserving the necessary habitat for the birds. Fire here is good. It brings life, not destruction. To show this, I have created an image of two birds sitting somewhere above a fire (fig. 3). The glow of it can be seen below them, but they are completely calm. This is a case where the symbolism is more important than the realism. The forest painting was more real, as it was based on a single image and mostly sticks to it, only really adding more atmosphere in the form of color and value adjustments. In this one, real birds may not want to sit right above the heat and smoke of a fire, instead moving until it passes, but that is not the point here. The fire is helping them, so for this painting they are content in its presence. The painting of the fire in the woods (fig. 4) mostly acts as context to this one, showing the brush fire that is happening as well as the fact that it is not hurting the trees, which still have their green needles.

Thorns are a good symbol for danger and being constricted, so I decided to use them for my next painting showing what happens when these burnings do not occur. In this one (fig. 5), the bird has been caught in the vines of a green brier, which are very common in these problem forests as well as being symbolically useful. Once again, this situation is too extreme to be literal, with the vines almost seeming to attack the bird as they pull it down. Instead it serves as a representation of the way unburned forests will become choked out by other species of trees and

intense amounts of understory plants such as these briers. Since the birds can not live in these crowded conditions, the briers are hurting the bird and it looks distressed. The focus is on the emotion of the bird in its struggle, but not how realistic that struggle is.

Though I feel strongly that these birds should have a right to exist just for themselves and not for any human benefit, it would be hard to avoid addressing the many other species that would be affected if they went extinct. To demonstrate this, I created the most abstract and conceptual of all the paintings (fig. 6). This one shows a dead woodpecker in one corner, casting a shadow over some of the many species that would be negatively affected if they were gone. I chose to have these species just silhouetted both because they are in shadow and the silhouettes could imply their absence, but also because I decided that the details of which animals they were was not the point. Focusing too much on them could distract from the main topic, so just knowing that other species are being affected was enough for this project. There is no real setting and the shadows do not quite work realistically either, because this one is all about concepts and theoretical situations, not any real events, so it has been disconnected more from reality than any of the others, where reality is more stretched than thrown out entirely.

Finally, there is the image of one of the woodpeckers sitting on a stump (fig. 7), which I have saved to discuss last mostly because I believe it to be the most successful and it stands the best alone. Most of the paintings function best inside the series where they can work off of each other, but this one was an earlier addition to the series and was painted with the intention of being able to tell the basis of the story by itself. I did not go this route with the others, because it would have caused them to feel redundant. This painting speaks to the aspect of deforestation as an issue, with the single cut tree standing in as a representative of longleaf pine forests as a

whole. Its larger theme is that of the uncertainty that comes with the status of an endangered species. They ride a line between safety and destruction, with the side they will ultimately fall to still to be determined, and I wanted to show that in this painting.

The bird itself is sitting calmly and does not seem to be in distress, but everything around it is sending other signals. I used loose brushstrokes around the bird to indicate some kind of panic, perhaps the flapping of wings as it tries to get away from some undefined evil. There is also a pile of feathers near the base of the stump. This is a symbol I associate heavily with the often violent and untimely death of a bird, as I have seen these disheartening piles many times in person. The feathers are still falling, so the danger must not be far off or perhaps the damage is in the process of being done. The hints of red throughout the work also indicate this sense of danger. Even where the bird is looking, off to the side to something out of frame which the viewer cannot see, could hint at an uncertain threat.

Conclusion

These paintings took both representation depictions and symbolic and abstract elements to show the story of the endangered species of red cockaded woodpeckers. Each piece focuses on a different element of this story, from their ideal habitat to the ultimate results if they were lost. Through these paintings I hope to have shown these birds in a way that makes them a little more personal than a simple photo or perfectly realistic painting would portray and that this will give a viewer the chance to get to know and connect with these birds on a deeper level.

Images



Fig 1. Michaela Gay, *Untitled*, September 2019, oil on canvas



Fig 2. Michaela Gay, *Untitled*, October 2019, oil on canvas



Fig 3. Michaela Gay,
Untitled, March 2020,
oil on canvas



Fig 4. Michaela Gay,
Untitled, April 2020,
oil on canvas



Fig 5. Michaela Gay,
Untitled, March 2020,
oil on canvas



Fig 6. Michaela Gay,
Untitled, April 2020,
oil on canvas



Fig 7. Michaela Gay,
Untitled, February 2020,
oil on canvas

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